

Readings: Ezekiel 36:24-28; Acts 2:1-6,14, 22b-23, 32-33; John 14: 15-17

Red Mass Homily  
Archdiocese of Washington  
September 30, 2018  
Msgr. Peter J. Vaghi

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is a distinct honor and privilege for me to offer the homily at this 66<sup>th</sup> annual Red Mass sponsored by the John Carroll Society. I am a priest and a lawyer and have happily served as chaplain to this Society during the last 31 years.

Originating centuries ago in Rome, Paris and London, the Red Mass has a rich tradition of invoking God's blessing on judges, lawyers, professors of law, governmental officials and all people involved in the administration of justice. This tradition continues annually and increasingly in many dioceses around our Nation.

This morning, we gather to celebrate the Red Mass at this Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit praying that the Holy Spirit will come upon each one of us with renewed power, each one involved in some aspect in the administration of the law and public service.

The "red," of the Red Mass, not only refers to the red vestments worn by the clergy today but also the tongues of fire in the Upper Room, or Cenacle, at Jerusalem. The "red" thus represents the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, the feast of the Holy Spirit. The Church was about to be born, a Church called to energize the world until the end of time, a Church continually growing.

It is as if each of us were gathered this September morning, not at this magnificent Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle at Washington D.C., but in the Upper Room at Jerusalem, centuries ago, where the Last Supper took place, that most important room in all of Christendom. Yes, we await the descent of the Holy

Spirit, the same Holy Spirit who descended on the apostles and the Mother of Jesus in that room at Jerusalem on Pentecost.

And we call upon the Holy Spirit to return and enlighten us, to enlighten in a special way each of you who serves the cause of justice and the common good. Yes, we call again and again for that “new spirit” to be placed within us, the same spirit prophesized by the great Hebrew prophet Ezekiel in our first reading where he promised that the Lord God would give us “a new heart and place a new spirit within” us. It is the same Holy Spirit who came upon the Church on Pentecost “like a strong driving wind which was heard all through the house where the [apostles] were seated.” And, scripture tells us that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”

But be aware! The Spirit comes gently. The Spirit is not felt as a burden, for the Spirit is light. In the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "The Spirit comes to enlighten the mind first of the one who receives him, and then, through him, the minds of others as well."

The Spirit comes with the tenderness of a true friend and protector to save, to teach, to counsel, to strengthen, to console, to renew, to heal.

Yes, to heal us. Could there not be a better time, both in our Church and Nation, to benefit from the healing power of the Holy Spirit. It is a power that treats the anger and divisions that so need the healing touch of our God if we are to continue our respective missions with love and effectiveness in our day.

And so we cry out: **“Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.”** The Spirit, after all, is the divine source of renewal, renewal so needed every day and in our day most especially.

Today at this Red Mass we thus call upon the same Holy Spirit to guide us in the exercise of our particular vocation as members of the legal profession and government service. It is the same Holy Spirit who helps us experience His wisdom and love as the guiding principles and foundation of our very existence moving us to be men and women of justice, compassion, boundless mercy and joy

in our respective vocations, men and women for others.

The Holy Spirit is referred to in today's gospel as "the spirit of truth." With the yearning for the "spirit of truth," then, allow me to refer this morning, at this holy Mass, to the moving words of our 242 year old Declaration of Independence unanimously adopted on July 4, 1776 by the Continental Congress.

We know, moreover, from a fifth century father of the church, Ambroiaaster, that "anything true ... is from the Holy Spirit." So we call upon the Holy Spirit to help us understand and deepen our understanding of these "truths" referred to in our Declaration of Independence.

At this annual Red Mass, it is truly a most appropriate time to reflect, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, on the certain "self evident" "truths" mentioned in the Declaration of Independence.

That foundational document of our democracy refers to the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" and it refers to truths that "we hold...to be self-evident." And among those truths, it refers to "certain unalienable rights" with which each of us is endowed by our Creator. It sets forth "that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

These are most memorable words. Our adherence to these self-evident truths about our unalienable rights helped bring our great democratic experiment into existence and has sustained us as a Nation.

In our day, these "truths," truths whose origin is the Holy Spirit, are sometimes seen in ways not always as self-evident--these truths that from the beginning of our national experiment helped define us as Americans--these truths of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Could there be a better basis for an American consensus than these truths set forth in the Declaration of Independence?

We know that Liberty, for example, cannot for long exist without truth, especially the transcendent truth of the human person. Nor is the pursuit of happiness for any one of us furthered if the life of each of us--including the least in our midst-- is not protected. Life is God's first gift to us. And I speak of life in every circumstance and condition and especially the lives of those on the periphery of

society—the poor and the needy.

With respect, moreover, to the human person, Saint John Paul II went so far as to state in his 10th encyclical letter "The Splendor of Truth" that "the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate--no individual, group, class, nation or state" (V.S. 99).

"Life, liberty and pursuit of happiness," yes, truths upon which this Nation was born 242 years ago. They are not changeable policies, or laws made by human beings, but cherished truths endowed to us by our Creator. Continued adherence to them ensures that this wonderful Nation will continue to grow as our forebears envisioned.

So, at this solemn Red Mass, we thus rededicate ourselves to ensuring that our freedoms and liberty are never taken for granted. Only through constant prayerful study, vigilance, and personal and collective effort will the magnificent vision of our forebears remain a reality today and endure in the years to follow.

Today we thus call upon "the spirit of truth" to enlighten us more deeply in the truth, and those self-evident truths upon which our Nation has been formed and based. Strengthened with this gift from heaven, then, we go forth to love and serve the Lord and each other, and so guided, to serve our Nation that we might be instruments of renewal in the service of justice and the common good. Yes, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel: "I will put my Spirit within you and make you live by my statutes."

I conclude with the words of our beloved Holy Father Pope Francis, appropriate words for this Mass of the Holy Spirit: "Let us renew our trust in the Holy Spirit every day. The trust that He enacts in us, He is in us, He gives us courage, confidence and peace! Let us be guided by Him, men and women of prayer, witnessing the Gospel with courage, becoming instruments in our world of God's unity and communion" (May 22, 2013).

Praised be Jesus Christ!